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ABSTRACT

Bringing standards, assessment, and accountability from the state down to school districts is not the right way to implement new policies. Standards, assessment, and accountability must be thought of in a holistic way, and the complexity of the issues must be recognized. Educators must welcome the demand and directive that standards be implemented, and they must leave policy decisions to policymakers. Policy questions may include "why" something is done, but "what" and "how" questions are not policy and are the province of educators. Policy implementation should be guided by clear policy direction and support. It must also be recognized that standards, assessment, and accountability are not linear. The current system almost guarantees that standards-based classrooms will not happen because an assessment culture has developed based on measurement that has in many cases turned into a testing culture. To support standards, a learning and teaching culture must be developed that is not defined by measurement, but by the outcomes that educators are trying to achieve. Policy issues that should frame the substance and content of policies about standards, assessment, and accountability include: a broad definition of accountability; the recognition of the importance of classroom-based assessment on top of which school- and district-based assessment and, finally, state assessment can stand; the improvement of learning, which should be the purpose of all standards, assessment, and accountability; the importance of classroom tests in providing information about students; and the principle that accountability leads to responsibility. (SLD)

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POLITICAL AND POLICY ISSUES RELATED TO LARGE SCALE ASSESSMENT
Dr. Doug Christensen

June 26, 2000

CCSSO Conference - Snowbird, Utah
Large Scale Assessment Conference

Thank you for the invitation to be part of this conference and for the opportunity to address the subject of political and policy issues to one of the large group gatherings of this conference. I state to you up front, that I believe unequivocally in the power of standards, assessment and accountability to be the foundation of dramatic improvements in our schools and in the achievement of students. However, I do not believe that the only way for standards, assessment and accountability to be implemented in each and every school and school district is for it to come from the state down. In fact, I believe that is the wrong way to do it. This may be my last speech at this conference because of my strong belief in the fact that bringing standards, assessment and accountability from the state down is the wrong way and will happen in Nebraska "over my dead body."

As far as the political and policy issues are concerned, and one both a national and state-by-state basis, I believe we have a fairly incoherent set of policies related to standards, assessment and accountability. I believe our policies lack rationality in the sense of what they could mean. In fact, I believe standards, assessment and accountability are based upon "old rationalities" which makes them stuck in previous practice and not interpreted and implemented in terms of their potential as a new paradigm for education. I believe we do not have the kind of "new" rationality that will lead us to the promise that standards, assessment and accountability hold.

Secondly, I believe we have allowed ourselves, by default or by design, I am not sure which (probably both), to define "policies" so liberally that we are 1) unable to have informed conversations with each other because of the diverse definitions of policy and 2) when we use the loose and fuzzy definitions, it seems to give us license to do anything and call it "policy, policy intervention, or policy strategies." And in fact, many times, they are none of those.

Both, the inability to have informed conversations and the license to define policy in anyway we want has had at least two results. In my opinion, we are fairly schizophrenic about standards, assessment and accountability. On the one hand, I believe our schizophrenia allows us to, use certain rhetoric about why we are implementing standards, assessment and accountability; yet on the other hand,

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practice something entirely different even practices that are in opposition to the foundation principles we site. Secondly, we tend to practice something in the name of one set of values or principles that we know by instinct or by evidence that is harmful or wrong regardless of our original statements of intent.

I also believe that in our schizophrenia, we tend to feel better when our need for logic and order allows us to assume a linear relationship among standards, assessment and accountability and that we can simply proceed from one to the next. When, in fact, the actual relationships between standards, assessment and accountability may be at once discreet, exclusive and inert in and of themselves, and at the same time organic and holistic. It is my opinion that we must think about standards, assessment and accountability more as a system, more organically, and more holistically. We must dump the schizophrenia that allows us to think simplistically about something (standards, assessment and accountability) that's very, very complex.

For those of us who are educators, this is our "rocket science." Individuals who have conversations about standards, assessment and accountability imploring participants in the discussion to recognize that standards, assessment and accountability are "not rocket science" always annoy me. I will tell you that this is rocket science. It is the most significant "education science" that I have ever faced in my career and I am sure it is for you as well. Could you imagine rocket scientists sitting around, trying to implore the participants with the phrase "folks, this isn't education science." Standards, assessment and accountability are very complex.

I think our schizophrenia has also created what I would call a policy vacuum. As we all know, nature abhors a vacuum. So do policymakers. When there is a vacuum in the policy discussions and decisions of policymakers, they rush in to fill that vacuum. What they fill the vacuum with tends to be discussions about practice. Anyone, with or without good intentions, can carry on discussions and make decisions about practice and make it look like, and sound like policy, when in fact, it is not.

So what are we to do?

First, it seems to me that we as educators must step up to the plate, welcoming the demand and the directive that we implement standards, assessment and accountability. It seems to me that as educators, we must recognize that the demand that we implement standards, assessment and accountability is a clear policy direction and it rightfully comes from policymakers. It is time for us to step to the plate and provide our professional leadership to the implementation and practice.

Second, we must leave policy decisions to policymakers. Otherwise we create the very vacuum that I have previously mentioned. As educators, we are partners in the conversation, but we are not the decision-makers in policy level conversations. Policymakers--governors, legislators, state boards of education, and chief state school officers--are the ones who make policy decisions. Educators must be partners, fully at the table, and fully participating in policy discussions. But policymakers make policy decisions.

Third, I think we need to be clear about what is and what is not policy. Clearly, policy is about answers to questions of why, what for, and/or what purpose or result. Policy questions may include "why are we doing this?" "What's the purpose?" "What results are to be achieved?" and so forth. Policy statements are statements of intent that answer the questions why, what for, and what purpose or result.

"What and how" questions are not policy. Answering those questions are practice decisions. And we, the profession, must step to the plate and do two things. One, we must define, implement and evaluate the practices we are asked to implement within the policy framework for which they are created. Two, we must work with the policymakers to achieve policy and practice coherence.

Above all, we must leave policy decisions to policymakers so they will leave practice decisions to the professionals.

I'd like to switch gears a little bit. I'd like to identify some of the policy perspectives that I believe would help us.

First, as educators, we need to develop a greater sense about policy so that when we are part of the conversation we know how to keep discussions at policy levels. Second, I want policymakers to better understand that policy not only clarifies the direction and the outcome but also takes a high road and holds out a promise of better things to come. One thing we must remember, and we must help policymakers remember, is that "policy is most powerful when it is a promise."

So, what would I regard as the critical policy perspectives? I'm going to break this into two sections. First, I would offer some "policy points" that should guide the implementation of policy. Second, I will try to define "policy issues" that should frame practice in terms of outcomes or results to be achieved.

First, some **policy points** about what should guide policy implementation.

One, we should recognize that local settings in which state level policy is to operate represents weak links between intent and outcomes. And, the essential point to remember is that this link is not strengthened by regulations and state mandates. This linkage is strengthened by clear policy direction, clear policy guidance, support, and accountability. Further, choices, options and leadership can strengthen these weak links. Again, mandates and regulations do not strengthen this relationship.

The second policy point about implementation I would offer is that standards, assessment and accountability are not linear. It is not logical that the next step from standards is to move to assessments and next to accountability. Imagine for a moment that John F. Kennedy, when he gave his famous speech declaring that "America, by the end of the decade, would place a man on the moon," and then went on to say that "we will spend the rest of the decade building a telescope to see that it happens." Of course, he did not say that and we spent the decade building the rocket and the guidance systems that would get us to the moon. We let assessment take care of itself. There was an appropriate time for the assessment and that was after the rocket and its guidance systems were built.

Before we rush to assessments, after having completed the design of standards, we need to implement standards-based classrooms first. Standards-based classrooms are our rockets and guidance systems.

Let me diverge for a moment from my discussion of policy points as guidelines for implementation to identify just exactly what a standards-based classroom is. Its implementation is essential to provide the foundation for moving from standards to assessment. There are many things that would define a standards-based classroom in comparison to more "traditional" classrooms. However, the following are six primary identifiers of standards-based classrooms:

- Everything--planning, creation, delivery, assessment, and evaluation--begins with the end (standards) in mind.
- Content is never an outcome. Content is a vehicle to an outcome.
- Assessment is never an event. It is integrated into instruction and self-assessment becomes a student skill to be mastered.

- Standards are the framework for conversations for building and for creating. The conversations, the building and the creating are all about students and their learning.
- Equity of opportunity drives instructional decisions as to instructional activities, materials, and strategies to be implemented.
- Equity of outcomes is the measure of success.

The third policy point to guide implementation is to understand that measurement freezes! Measurement freezes the measure and the system that supports it and is frozen in place once the measurement is introduced. If we fail to recognize the power of measurement and the unit that used to measure, consider that the United States is the only industrialized and supposedly informed country that does not use the metric system. It is not used simply because the current system of United States measurement is frozen in place as well as the systems and objects that it measures.

We have almost guaranteed that standards-based classrooms will not happen because we have developed an assessment culture based upon measurement that many cases has turned into a testing culture, when in fact what we need are standards-based classrooms. To support standards, we need a learning culture and teaching culture that is not defined by measurement but by the outcomes we are trying to achieve.

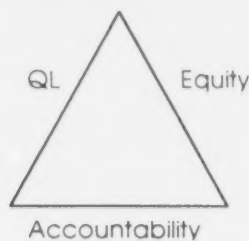
The fourth policy point to guide implementation is about "coupling." When one system is "tightly coupled" to one component, that tight coupling creates "loose coupling" to another. We have tightly coupled education and the schooling process to assessment and testing. As a result of this tight coupling, we have loosened the coupling of education and the schooling process to standards. It is the standards that are about learning and statements about what students are supposed to know and be able to do and it is the standards to which the education of students and the schooling process should be tightly coupled, not assessment and testing.

The fifth and final policy point guiding implementation is that accountability that is external is always more regulatory than it is educational. And it is always more compliance in nature than it is improvement in nature. It is very difficult to build school improvement strategies on regulation and compliance frameworks.

Why don't we switch gears to **policy issues** that should frame the substance and content of policies about standards, assessment and accountability.

First, we should define accountability as broadly as possible. I prefer to define accountability in the broad terms of "doing the right things" and "getting the right results." We are accountable not only for what we do or not only for the results we get, but BOTH.

Imagine for a minute an equilateral triangle. On one side is quality learning (or standards or outcomes or results). The opposing leg is equity, (referring to opportunity, instructional practices, the process of schooling). And at the bottom, joining the two sides, is accountability.



In this model, schools would be held accountable for doing the right things (equity), creating opportunity to learn, sound instructional practices, schooling processes that provide each student an opportunity to learn so that "getting the right results" (quality learning) defined by standards, outcomes and results that are equitable for all students. Neither right things nor right results can be represented by accountability systems that report only scores. Scorekeeping drives out doing the right things as part of accountability and as a result, scorekeeping accountability models cannot be used for school improvement.

The second policy issue that should frame the substance and content of policy for standards, assessment and accountability is this: "What we fail to build at the base or foundation, we will pay for at the top." The foundation for assessment which should be driving our discussions and implementation of standards, assessment and accountability is classroom-based assessment; classroom-based assessment on top of which we build school and district-based assessment on top of which we build state assessment. When we begin at the state level, we narrow district and school assessment and classroom-based assessments to only those things which are measured by the state test. Anything at the district, school or classroom level that is not connected to the state test, becomes "disconnected" and in fact, is driven

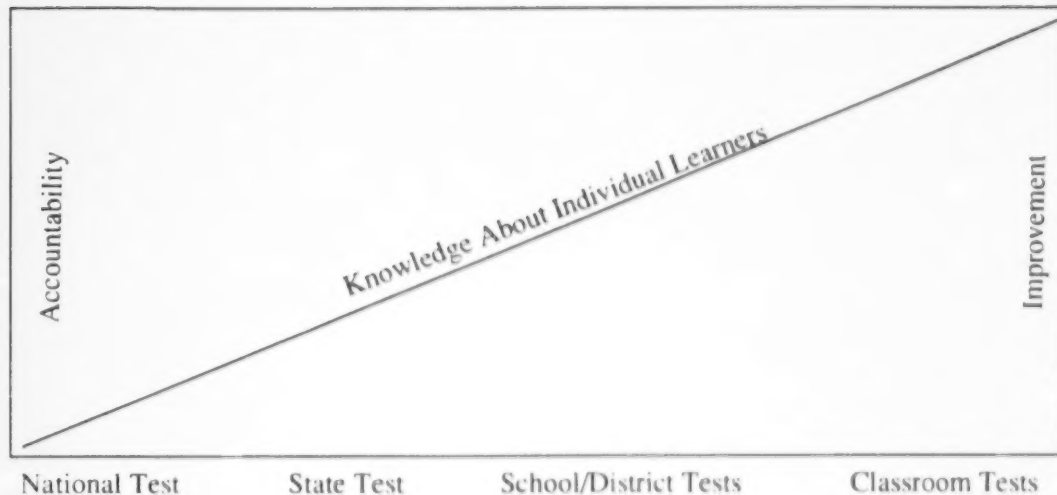
out. In many school districts in which there are single, state-mandated tests, most school and district and classroom-based assessment are totally driven out utilizing the state test for all four functions -- state, district, school and classroom.

A third policy issue that should frame standards, assessment and accountability has to do with the improvement of learning which is what we all profess to be the purpose of standards, assessment and accountability. If we are serious about improving learning, we must put tools in the hands of teachers -- knowledge, skills, and attitudes and the resources of time, expertise and professional development -- if we want to improve learning. When we think about knowledge, skills and attitudes of teachers and the resources they need, the most powerful tools for teachers are being able to, for themselves, answer these two questions:

1. What should students know and be able to do?
2. How do we know they really know what they are supposed to know?

These are the questions teachers must be able answer and the answers cannot be handed to them from the state.

The fourth policy issue that should be framing standards, assessment and accountability is understanding what it is we find out from the various kinds of assessment that are available from national tests through state tests, through district and school tests, down to classroom tests. The question "what teachers and schools will know about individual student learning" can be answered by a graph that shows that national tests give us very little individual student information which will help to improve student learning on an individual, student by student basis. Classroom tests give the most.



Adapted from Marzano, et al., 1999

Clearly, classroom-based assessments are the ones that give teachers the individual student information that they can help each student on a case-by-case learn the things they are expected to learn. While the other kinds of assessment -- school, district, state and national -- have their place, they provide information on a group basis which does little to help individual student learning. The absence of good classroom based assessment insures that school, district, state and national assessment will not provide teachers the kind of information they need to work on a day-to-day basis in the classroom.

The fifth policy issue that should frame standards, assessment and accountability is this principle:

Accountability leads to responsibility. (At least it should!)

As an educator, and still seeing the world as a classroom teacher, I can tell you that I will take responsibility for what I do if:

(1) I value the things for which you would hold me accountable;

- (2) If I have something to say about the meaning and practice for what it is I am to be held accountable (if someone listens); and
- (3) If it touches what I am about and my core values as a professional and as a person.

I believe I, and most other educators believe they got into this profession because they fell in love with children, because they felt a calling, and because they committed their lives to kids and their learning. I see nothing about state level standards, assessments and accountability that come down to schools in the form of regulations that touches any of these core values. However, as an educator, if you ask me to begin that process at the classroom level, everything about standards, assessment and accountability touches those three core values -- about children, about my commitment to their learning, and about the calling I accepted a long time ago.

Let me conclude with an analogy or metaphor that to me to summarize both the policy points of implementation and the policy issues that should frame the purposes of standards, assessment and accountability. This metaphor speaks to me.

You can't fatten cattle by weighing them. However, you must weigh them once in a while to know if they are ready to leave the yard. (Leaving the yard is a metaphor for moving in the curriculum, moving from grade level to grade level, or graduating.)

It is also true that you must weigh them from time to time to know if what you are doing to and for them is doing any good. Weighing cattle occasionally provides a means of determining if what they are fed is doing any good and if the yard in which they are housed, is one that supports them. The "feed" is curriculum and instruction and the "yard" is schooling. If you want to have cattle gain weight, it is important to pay attention to the feed (curriculum and instruction) and pay attention to the yard (schooling).

We must recognize that weighing contributes nothing to the cow. If anything, the act of weighing is annoying to the cow.

In the cattle business, it is not important to get better at weighing because the truly "informed" cattlemen know that "weighing in" is not as important as "grading out" and no amount of weighing will determine grade.

Using this metaphor also permits me to bring up a final point about "high stakes" (steaks) weighing. In the case of a cow, if they perform at the weigh-in and meet the standards, they go on a field trip, but don't come back. My apologies for the metaphor. I love using it. I appreciate your indulgence.

Let me close with this. I believe unequivocally in the power and policy of standards, assessment and accountability. I believe the real power will come not from the state policy but the local practice. The power of standards must come from the classroom. We must empower teachers and students. To empower classrooms makes it possible for the promise (of better things to come) of standards to become reality/

Thank you.